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UNCLAS DJIBOUTI 000919

SIPDIS

FOR CA/VO

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: CVIS CMGT PINR PREL DJ

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI'S PROTOCOL CHIEF THREATENS SUSPENSION

U.S. DIPLOMATIC PRIVILEGES

¶11. (SBU) Summary. On September 10, Djama Elmi Darar, Chief of Presidential Protocol, accompanied by the head of presidential security, expressed to ConOff and Charge d'Affaires his displeasure in not being able to procure immediately a visa for one of the members of the security staff chosen to accompany President Guelleh to UNGA. Darar threatened to halt all issuance of any diplomatic visas to Americans, refuse American duty-free imports, delay American diplomatic vehicle registrations, and hold back gasoline coupons until the visa was issued. Post's coincidental receipt of SAO clearance around the same time permitted issuance, but the issue may reappear in future application instances.
End summary.

¶12. (SBU) The Djiboutian Protocol Office has repeatedly delivered visa requests to Embassy Djibouti with the expectation of issuance in an unreasonably short time frame. The last diplomatic delegation to the U.S. in May 2005, resulted in three individuals not being able to accompany the president because they were subject to SAOs, and did not bring their passports in time to receive visas when the SAOs cleared.

¶13. (U) Given the history of last minute applications, Embassy Djibouti formally requested, beginning in June, that the government's Protocol Office submit applications for the UNGA delegation as early as possible. When the applications finally arrived at COB on Tuesday September 6, more than several were incomplete, lacked photographs or had invalid passports. We managed to issue 19 out of 20 visas, but one was delayed by the need for an SAO.

¶14. (U) On Saturday, September 10, a weekend, ConOff received word that the Protocol Chief wanted an immediate meeting regarding the case of the individual requiring an SAO. (Note: Although an SAO clearance had been accorded overnight, the visa still could not be immediately authorized for technical reasons, as Embassy's parser server is not normally rebooted on weekends.)

¶15. (SBU) In the meeting, also attended by the Charge, Darar immediately brought up the visa that was still unissued. ConOff and Charge attempted to explain that processing, even for diplomatic visas, sometimes takes time, and every effort was being made to expedite this particular application. Darar responded that if the visa were not issued within the next hour Djibouti would cease issuance of diplomatic visas for Americans, refuse any American duty-free imports, delay American diplomatic vehicle registrations, and hold back coupons for purchase of fuel. Charge said that the threat would need to be passed along to Washington and offered Darar the chance to retract the threat. Instead he repeated it with emphasis, and agreed that the threat should be communicated to Washington. During the course of the meeting, the parser was rebooted, so that name check and FR could clear in NIV. After Darar left, ConOff was able to authorize and print the visa in question. The passport was picked up from the embassy five minutes later.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: While the meeting itself had no impact on the timing of the issuance of the outstanding visa, the fact that it was issued shortly after the conclusion of meeting will probably confirm Darar's belief that verbal pressure can facilitate matters regarding visas. We are uncertain if there is substance to Darar's threat to withhold diplomatic privileges to the Embassy as a general policy for the future. We will monitor and apprise Washington of developments accordingly. End Comment

RAGSDALE